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ABSTRACT

Determining the limits of accountability and how schools should be assessed is one of the most difficult problems in education. The state of Texas has attempted accountability by rewarding some schools and punishing others without justification. The school superintendents of Bexar County (Texas) and the Center for Educational Leadership at Trinity University have reviewed the problem of accountability and proposed a value-added approach. Productivity should be measured by a school's contribution to student learning, and not an absolute level of student learning. The learning environment depends on family, neighborhood, public institutions, and schools, all of which need to be considered for school achievement. The Center for Educational Leadership published "Smart Schools for San Antonio's Future" in 1992. The report suggests augmented teaching and learning for all students, authentic assessment, cooperative learning settings, interdisciplinary teaching, functional schedules and time frames, essential learning, one standard, commitment to technology, extended school year, greater student responsibility, and commitment to public service. Under governance and leadership, the report suggests community-based management, smart leadership, safe and stable school environments, enhanced professionalism, school choice, and parent and community involvement. (JPT)

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GETTING ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ON TRACK IN TEXAS

A REPORT BY THE
SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS
OF BEXAR COUNTY

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Re: GETTING ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ON TRACK IN TEXAS

MEMO TO THE SAN ANTONIO COMMUNITY AND THE STATE OF TEXAS

We are committed to a valid and just system of school accountability. In this report, we discuss flaws in our present system of accountability and show how these flaws can be corrected.

Our job is to teach all students in a way that ensures that each becomes competent in the basic skills, has mastered important subject matter, is able to function in the modern workplace, accepts citizenship responsibilities, and becomes a person of character. To do this, we must teach students to use their minds well. Schools should be held accountable for achieving these goals.

Determining the limits of accountability and how schools should be assessed are problems that are not easily resolved. Present efforts by the state of Texas to answer these questions have resulted in some schools being rewarded and others being punished by this system without justification. The system is not able to discriminate between schools that are doing a good job and schools that are not, or between schools that are improving and schools that are not. For these reasons, studying schools that are labeled as effective or ineffective by the system can result in the wrong lessons being learned.

Commissioner Meno and his staff have struggled to develop an accountability plan for Texas that puts a best face on existing legislation. But the legislation itself is faulty. The state should abandon its present definition of school productivity in favor of one that is more valid and just. Productivity should be defined as a function of a school's *contribution* to student learning, and not an absolute level of student learning. In business and economics, for example, productivity is a relative term. Just as one corporation or nation can be more productive than another even though its gross national product is lower, so can one school be more productive than another even though its students' test scores are lower. In this report, we review the problem and propose a value-added approach to accountability as an alternative.

The School Superintendents of Bexar County and
Center For Educational Leadership, Trinity University

FIXING ACCOUNTABILITY IN TEXAS

Beginning in the Fall of 1993, the Texas Education Agency, in response to a new law passed by the state legislature, placed every school in the state into one of four performance categories: exemplary, recognized, acceptable performance and low performance. The ratings were based on student scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test, attendance rates and on the number of students who have dropped out.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS SYSTEM?

This system makes the assumption that a high achieving school and a value-adding school are the same.

This system implies a cause and effect relationship between the rating a school receives and the performance of teachers and administrators who work in that school.

This system rewards some teachers, principals and schools who should not be rewarded and punishes other teachers, principals and schools who should not be punished.

These flaws in the state's accountability system raise serious scientific and moral questions.

AN EXAMPLE

Are high achieving schools and value-adding schools the same? Let's take the Knightsbridge community schools[1] as an example. Knightsbridge is located north of Houston. According to an advertisement that appeared in a recent edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, "Knightsbridge's students attend one of the best high schools in Texas. Student scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) are equal to or exceed those of students in every district in the Houston area. College statistics are staggering. Ninety-six percent of the high school students plan to attend college. The high school is just one example of the excellent education Knightsbridge's students enjoy. Public grade schools, pre-schools, Montessori schools, church-affiliated schools and day care centers in Knightsbridge also provide outstanding learning environments."

Needless to say, the schools that serve the Knightsbridge community were rated favorably by the state's accountability system. Student attendance rates are high, thanks to parents who insist that they go. Very few students drop out of Knightsbridge's schools, due to parents who insist that they stay. Further, about ninety percent of the families with school-aged children in Knightsbridge have both parents present in the home and virtually all of the families can be considered middle or upper income. These statistics are linked to lower dropout rates, less gang activity, and higher student achievement. Most of the students who enter Knightsbridge's schools speak English fluently; already know their

1 Knightsbridge is a pseudonym, but the events are factually based.

letters and sounds with many already knowing how to read; come from homes that are filled with books and computers; have community agencies committed to serve their needs; go to summer camp; take lessons in piano, dance, karate, etc.; see doctors regularly; and eat and sleep well. Knightbridge's students are brought up at home to respond favorably to the competitive environment of the school, to sit quietly, to be studious, and to otherwise respond to the values of the typical school.

If Knightsbridge's scores are linked to these factors rather than to what teachers and principals are doing, then questions have to be raised about how much value its schools are adding to the education of their students. Would students do just as well on the state's indicators if the existing principals and teachers were replaced with new ones? What would happen if large numbers of students were suddenly home-schooled, transferred to private schools, or even transferred to schools that are labeled "low performing" by the state's system? Would they do just as well as before? If they did just as well, then no significant cause and effect relationship would exist between what teachers and principals in Knightsbridge are doing and student scores, dropout rates and attendance statistics. We would be able to exchange the principals and teachers of Knightsbridge with a random sample of principals and teachers from schools rated in the lower categories of the state's accountability system without seeing much of a change in the accountability indicators. Since a significant cause and effect relationship would not exist between what the schools are doing and the showing of their students on the state's effectiveness indicators, the schools might be considered high achieving but not value-adding.

ADDING VALUE

Many schools who serve communities similar to Knightsbridge manage to *add value* to the advantages that the students bring. As a result, the performance of their students is not just up to par but extraordinary. These schools are *both* high achieving and value-adding. Unfortunately, the state's new accountability system is not able to differentiate between the "Knightsbridges" that are high achieving but not value-adding and the "Knightsbridges" that are *both* high achieving and value-adding.

Nor is the state's new accountability system able to differentiate between schools with scores lower than Knightsbridge's that manage to add value and those that don't. The scores of such value-adding schools might remain modest on an absolute scale, but would still represent significant gains in student performance. A school that *adds value* in this way is a good school, and should be celebrated rather than labeled low performing.

THE LABELING PROBLEM

After a recent high school "pep rally" themed to encouraging students to think more of their abilities, to try harder, and to perform better in school one student remarked, ". . . but ma'am, everybody in San Antonio thinks we're dumb." Being labeled "low performing" perpetuates low expectations and low performance—a phenomenon known as the self-fulfilling prophecy. Students come to believe that they cannot be successful in school, and this further complicates and frustrates the efforts of teachers and principals to maximize learning.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?

What are the conditions that are needed for every student to learn to be competent in the basic skills, to master important subject matter, to function in the modern workplace, to accept citizenship responsibilities, and to become a person of character? Educational research tells us that the answer to this question, while difficult to achieve, is easy to understand.

Simply put, the conditions for effective teaching and learning are best when the ecology for learning is in balance.[2] The ecology for learning consists of the family and neighborhood, the community and its institutions, and the schools. All three parts of the ecology for learning contribute to the *development of human capital.* Beginning with birth, each child begins to deposit funds of knowledge into his or her human capital development savings account. These funds of knowledge increase in quantity and kind as the child's interactions increase within the family and the neighborhood, and within the community and its institutions. When children arrive in kindergarten, they bring these human capital savings accounts with them.

The funds of knowledge that children bring to school however, differ in kind and in quantity. Some children have learned how to "sit quietly and wait their turn." Other children have learned to assert themselves. Some children have learned to respond to the school's competitive environment. Other children have learned to avoid competition. Some children have visited small towns and farms and have learned a great deal about how they work, how they contribute to the economy, and what life in them is like. Other children have never visited a farm or small town, nor have they seen a book or a serious television program about farms and rural life.

Students who bring the "right" funds of knowledge from home and community are better able to accumulate the funds of knowledge that schools offer. For them the ecology for learning is in balance. These students are likely to be high achievers regardless of what the schools do.

The more connected the family is to the community, and the family and community to the school, the more likely the funds of knowledge from these sources are to be properly balanced. Where the ecology for learning is out of balance, the school must help the family and community adjust to the school. And the school must accept its responsibility for adjusting its values to the family and community parts of the learning ecosystem. A good accountability system takes into account ecological factors.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

We believe that the state should hold schools accountable for *adding value* to the human capital that students accumulate in the areas of academic development, adult socialization and character development. Since success will depend on whether the family and neighborhood, the community, and the school dimensions of the ecology for learning are in balance, the state should develop an accountability system that includes benchmarking of relevant indicators. We need to know where a school is at time one and what progress it has made at time two. We need to know the nature and size of the human capital savings

2 For example, John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1984.

account that each student brings to school and maintains throughout his or her school career. Once this information is available, schools should be asked to develop report cards that include not only test data and dropout statistics, but also information about efforts to improve other dimensions of the learning ecosystem. Report cards would provide answers to such questions as: How well are students achieving? How do test scores and other performance indicators compare with where students were at an earlier time? Given the nature and condition of the school's learning ecology, does this information indicate that the school has added value to the development of students' human capital? If not, what must be done to help this school to become more productive—to increase its contribution to student learning?

A FAIR AND JUST SYSTEM

Most Texans agree that holding schools accountable is not only reasonable, but necessary, if we want quality schools. Most Texans also believe in the traditional American values of fairness and justice. These values are embodied in the way we play. We devise handicap systems to ensure that golfers and jockeys compete fairly. We invent "draft" systems to ensure that over time, teams are able to compete fairly. We believe that most Texans want to apply these same values of fair play to our schools. To play fair we need a more valid definition of school productivity and a value-added approach to school accountability.

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO SAN ANTONIO

During the spring of 1992, the Center for Educational Leadership at Trinity University published a document called *Smart Schools for San Antonio's Future*. In that report, we provided a blueprint for what San Antonio needed to do to ensure that every child came to school ready to learn, and to stay in school as a willing learner. We pledged ourselves to make every school in San Antonio a learning and inquiring community that provides students with world class educational experiences. To accomplish this goal, we challenged the community of San Antonio to commit itself to a new social contract. At the heart of this contract was an appeal for San Antonio to become known as the American city that puts families and children first.

We indicated in the report, and we repeat here, that we do not offer challenges to others lightly. We too must challenge ourselves to think differently, to give more, and to create new social contracts that redefine our work. Despite the message from educational research that results are best achieved when the ecology for learning is in balance, we believe that we must move ahead regardless of the alignment difficulties we face. We must, in the words of the Southwestern Bell Foundation, "visibly separate the issues of better learning for all students from the issues of family and student support needs of at-risk students from the schools we have now. The latter is equally important, but must not become confused with the former."[3] We pledge to work as hard as we can on the align-

3 Southwestern Bell Foundation, "To Achieve Educational Change, *Focus the Discussion*: The Neanderthal Gambit." Undated, p. 4.

ment issue. At the same time, we commit ourselves to restructuring schools under our jurisdiction in ways that embody the following principles for teaching and learning and for school governance and leadership.

PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

1. AUGMENTED TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

The less ready the student is to learn, the more enriched learning experiences should be. Augmented teaching and learning both speeds up and enriches the experience that students have.

2. AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Authentic assessment more accurately identifies what students know. Schools must demand levels of mastery which ensure not just accumulation of knowledge, but also understanding and ability to use this knowledge.

3. COOPERATIVE LEARNING SETTINGS

The balance between competition and cooperation that now exists in schools should be rethought to allow for more cooperative learning settings that teach students how to live and learn together, to solve problems together and to care for each other.

4. INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

The subject matter should be organized around problems and teaching should be more interdisciplinary without sacrificing the integrity of the disciplines.

5. FUNCTIONAL SCHEDULES AND TIME FRAMES

Teaching schedules and time frames for learning should be dictated by what teachers and principals are trying to accomplish and should emerge from day-by-day assessments and decisions that they make about teaching and learning.

6. ESSENTIAL LEARNING

Schools should make clearer choices about what students should learn, identify a curriculum considered to be essential, then focus on mastery of this more concentrated curriculum.

7. ONE STANDARD

No differentiation in standards should exist among students. Instead, a common and challenging core of studies and a common standard should be identified. The time allowed for achieving this standard should be flexible.

8. COMMITMENT TO TECHNOLOGY

Students should know how to use technology. Computers, laser discs, telecommunication devices and other artifacts of technology are not just more efficient ways to deliver instruction, but tools that students should learn to use to solve problems.

9. EXTENDED SCHOOL YEAR

Efforts should be made to explore ways to increase the amount of quality time available for both student learning and planning and reflection by teachers.

10. STUDENTS WORK, TEACHERS LEAD

Teaching schedules and learning environments should be created which enable teachers to plan carefully, stage problems to be solved, bring together examples of learning materials, organize students for learning, and guide the process. Students should accept more responsibility for their own learning than is now the case by engaging in research, developing projects, and using primary source materials rather than just textbooks.

11. COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC SERVICE

Schools should become places where active engagement in the real world, individual initiative, problem solving, responsibility, and the ideal of service are important. Students should participate in internships and public service projects as part of the school curriculum.

PRINCIPLES FOR GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

1. COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT

Schools and their communities should have control over their own purposes and should have the authority to make the decisions necessary to achieve these purposes.

2. SMART LEADERSHIP

Leadership should be based on shared ideas and commitments. Schools and their communities should design what they do and why they do it based on their purposes, values and beliefs.

3. FUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS, ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS AND STABLE ENVIRONMENTS

Schools should provide students of all ages with opportunities to build long-term connections with others, to feel safe and counted in a caring environment. This happens when schools are organized around ideas and themes, rather than bricks and mortar, thus allowing for several small, independent schools to flourish side by side within the same

building. This happens when teachers and students stay together for longer periods of time, thus allowing for the building of learning communities.

4. ENHANCING PROFESSIONALISM

Teachers should be challenged to accept the mantle of professionalism by asking for their commitment to practice in exemplary ways, to take charge of their own professional development, and to accept a greater share of the responsibility for school success.

5. CHOICE

No single kind of school works best for all students. Teachers need to know students well in order to teach them well. The more a school resembles a community, the less likely students are to behave improperly. Parents find it easier to connect to a school when they are personally involved and committed. For these reasons, schools and school districts should give parents and students access to more choices as to the kinds of schools students should attend. We are committed to exploring such options as magnet schools, schools within schools, and charter schools as ways to provide more choices for parents and students.

6. SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Parents are first teachers, and homes first classrooms. Parents should be full partners in everything that the school does.

Tom Brown Superintendent, Southside ISD

Richard Clifford Superintendent, Southwest ISD

Anthony Constanzo Superintendent, East Central ISD

Ann Dixon Superintendent, Somerset ISD

Ron Durbon Superintendent, South San Antonio ISD

Galen Elof Superintendent, Judson ISD

Barbara Maddox Superintendent., Randolph ISD

Richard Middleton Superintendent, North East ISD

Thomas Moseley Superintendent, Fort Sam Houston ISD

Dolores Munoz Superintendent, Edgewood ISD

Augustine Orci Superintendent, Northside ISD

Victor Rodriguez Superintendent, San Antonio ISD

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Raymond Vick Superintendent, Harlandale ISD

John H. Moore Norine R. Murchison Professor and
Chair, Department of Education, Trinity University

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Trinity University

THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS OF BEXAR COUNTY AND CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Center for Educational Leadership combines the resources of five school districts, community service agencies, business and corporate sponsors, municipal government, and Trinity University to form a comprehensive university-public school collaborative directed at improving schools in our community. The purposes of the Center are to provide a cross-district and university-school forum directed at studying the issues affecting quality education and engaging in cross-district school improvement projects. Other initiatives underway in the Center for Educational Leadership include:

THE PRINCIPALS' CENTER

Established in 1991, the Principals' Center is a learning community comprised of member principals, assistant principals, and other interested in improving schools by supporting and strengthening. It is structured to provide members opportunities to reflect on their practice and to grow professionally in a variety of [illegible], times, and styles.

THE SMART SCHOOLS NETWORK

In January of 1992, the Center for Educational Leadership presented a document to the city of San Antonio entitled, *Smart Schools for San Antonio's Future*. This document was written collaboratively by the Trinity Partners, the policy-making body of the Center made up of public school administrators, and the Center outlined new goals, visions, and design principles for quality public school education in San Antonio. In 1993, the Center asked schools throughout San Antonio to commit themselves to the implementation of these agenda items, and the Smart Schools Network was born. Currently, 48 schools are active members of the network.

TOMORROW'S LEADERS

The department of education's [illegible] group of outstanding classroom teachers from across the city who have been recommended by their districts to participate in a two-year administrative master of education program at Trinity University. These participants continue a full-time teaching program at their respective schools while completing the program.

FIVE-YEAR MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING PROGRAM

The department of education has recently introduced an effective and innovative five-year teacher education program leading to the Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Students complete a baccalaureate degree in a discipline(s) normally taught in the elementary or secondary schools and then embark on an internship year which includes an academic year in a public school classroom, as well as supporting course work at Trinity.

For additional information regarding the Center for Educational Leadership, please contact: John H. Moore, Director, Center for Educational Leadership, 715 Stadium Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78212-7200, or call (210) [illegible]-4401.

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